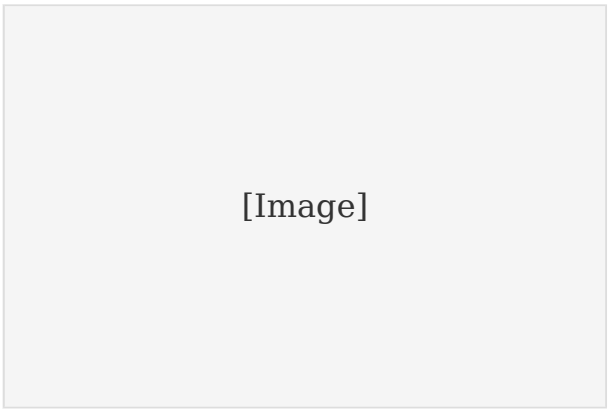
Difference Between Oriental & Eastern Orthodox Churches | Synonym

JEREMY BRADLEY



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Eastern Christianity is a broad term that encompasses the Christian traditions found in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, Asia Minor, Africa, the Middle East and parts of the Far East. All Christian traditions that did not develop in Western Europe are thus considered to be part of Eastern Christianity, however the term does not denote any single tradition or church. Two of the largest Eastern Christian sects are the Oriental Orthodoxy and the Eastern Orthodox Church. While sharing some beliefs, these two churches disagree on fundamental issues of theology.

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1 Nomenclature

In the West, the term "oriental" is often used as a synonym for "eastern." When it comes to religious traditions, however, the two words denote different churches.

Oriental Orthodox churches are distinct from those referred to as the Eastern Orthodox Church. The Oriental Orthodox can be further subdivided into six organizations -- Coptic Orthodox, Ethiopian Orthodox, Syriac Orthodox, Eritrean Orthodox, Indian-Syrian Orthodox and American Apostolic. These branches are in communion with one another but have distinct hierarchies.

2 Points of Departure

Oriental Orthodoxy and Eastern Orthodox Churches disagree on which of the ecumenical councils they recognize. The ecumenical councils were a series of conferences where church leaders and theologists would meet to discuss and settle important matters of Church doctrine. The first seven ecumenical councils date from 325 to 787 and were an attempt to reach a consensus on the establishment of a unified Church throughout the Roman Empire. Oriental Orthodox churches recognize only the first three ecumenical councils -- the First Council of Nicaea, the First Council of Constantinople and the First Council of Ephesus. They rejected the decisions made at the Council of Chalcedon which followed in 451, so they are sometimes called Old Oriental Churches or Non-Chalcedonians. The Eastern Orthodox Church -- sometimes called the Orthodox Catholic Church -- on the other hand, considers all seven councils to be important and is therefore not in communion with the Oriental Orthodox churches. Some dialogue, however, has been had between the two branches within the last 50 years.

3 Christological Terminology

The rift between the Oriental Orthodox churches and the remainder of the Eastern Christian sects, including the Eastern Orthodox Church, was caused by disagreement over Christological terminology, or terms relating to the church's definition of who Christ is. The First Council of Nicaea in 325 declared Jesus to be "consubstantial" with God, or that they are actually one and the same. The Council of Constantinople in 381 further solidified and reinforced this belief. In 431, the First Council of Ephesus held that Jesus, while both divine and human, is only one being or person. Both the Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox accept these three councils. Twenty years later, however, the Council of Chalcedon declared that Jesus is one person in two complete natures, one divine and the other human.

The Oriental Orthodox churches considered this to be heresy and likened it to the beliefs of Nestoria, Patriarch of Constantinople from 428 to 431, who said that Christ was two distinct beings, one divine (the Logos) and one human (the man Jesus).

4 Further Implications

While the terminology caused the main point of contention, the refusal of the Oriental Orthodox churches to accept the declarations at Chalcedon was coupled with political and imperial issues. The patriarchs of Constantinople, for instance, remained in communication with church leaders from Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem even though they disagreed on church doctrine. On the flip side, Rome pulled away from ties with the Eastern churches. These religious differences were thus also fueled by political territories. Later, in 1518, the Byzantine Emperor Justin I convinced the Western Roman Empire to adopt the Chalcedon decision which led to a communion between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Holy See which exists until this day, although they too are distinct Christian entities.

About the Author

Jeremy Bradley works in the fields of educational consultancy and business administration. He holds a Master of Business Administration degree.

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